

**FROM GOOD VS. EVIL TO RATIONAL VS.  
EMOTIONAL: A DISCUSSION OF BINARIES OF  
KNOWLEDGE AND THOUGHT**

**Rebecca Shamash**  
*University of Minnesota*

**ABSTRACT** This paper is a response to a graduate seminar entitled “Postcolonialism, Globalization, and Education.” Using postcolonial and feminist theory, I discuss connections between demographic binaries (male/female, black/white) and epistemological binaries (rational/emotional, objective/subjective). I argue that ingrained binary thinking privileges a particular epistemology, namely one that is Western, patriarchal, and based on rationality and logic, over other ways of thinking and knowing, thus invalidating other knowledges, such as those based on feeling, emoting, and sensing. In rejecting these ways of knowing, we move away from caring, compassion and empathy—all necessary tools for dismantling ills such as racism and sexism. Accessing and validating these alternative ways of knowing might contribute to making our society, our schools, and ourselves more whole, more equal, and more human.

**KEYWORDS** good, evil, man, woman, binaries, feminism

*“Crazy people are not crazy if one accepts their reasoning” -  
Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Of Love and Other Demons*

**Introduction**

Binary ways of thinking pervade our culture, implicating psyches, minds, and language. From “good vs. evil” to fine lines that separate “black and white” issues to Men From Mars and women from Venus (Gray et al, 1992) these omnipresent dualities serve to label, classify, value, and create divisions between individuals in communities both local and global through the assignment of positive and negative values to opposing characteristics. One particularly pernicious effect of these divisions is the privileging of a particular epistemology,

namely one that is Western, patriarchal, and based on rationality and logic, over other ways of thinking and knowing. While there are numerous benefits to structured, rational thought, it also serves the interests of a specific group of people, while silencing others. Equating the logical with the legitimate also invalidates other knowledges, such as those based on feeling, emoting, and sensing. In effect, truth becomes associated with data and proof, and we lose the veracity found in art, narrative, and experience.

Due to our situation within this epistemology, it can be quite difficult to see or accept other ways of knowing. Western epistemology is built into American intuitions, education, and ways of life. To illuminate how some knowledges are privileged over others and the damaging effects of this preference, I will discuss personal experiences as well as analyze excerpts from *What I Learned in Medical School* (Takakuwa et al, 2004), an edited collection of essays written by medical students who identify with non-dominant groups. Their stories address the tensions that arise in a traditionally white, male, heteronormative space that educates and grooms future members of a professional and intellectual elite. The featured voices express discomfort and confusion with an educational system that requires them to think and know in ways that negate their sense of self or conflict with their values. Through their experiences, as they question and struggle with binary thinking and with their assignment to the negative pole, they reveal the damage that comes from suppressing knowledge and also the ways in which our society might heal and progress if we could come to honor all ways of thinking and knowing. I will draw from feminist and postcolonial theory in an attempt to elucidate their, and my, experiences in the context of this current moment in time and place.

### **The Binary**

While categories of race, spirituality, thought, gender, and physicality may seem disparate, I believe that they are in fact deeply connected—all part of a single Binary system that assigns positive or negative values to opposite poles, and accordingly to the individuals identified with each. The recognition of these dualities is not inherently harmful, and many non-Western knowledge systems include philosophies of opposite forces or energies. What is troubling about our conceptions of binaries is the value judgment that always accompanies them. Because one pole must be judged as superior to the other, inferiority

is a necessary result, and disparate ideas and symbols come to be understood as oppositional, rather than complementary. Feminist scholars Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) question visible differences between various incarnations of structural inequality: “If the meanings of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are not...just about natural differences, this prompts us to explore the ways in which these meanings articulate with other inequalities which are supposedly structured by other differences. We need to ask not how these other inequalities are themselves naturalized... but how their distinctiveness from gender is naturalized” (pg. 11). The following chart contains a list of frequently cited binaries. I have ordered them so that by reading vertically, the reader might make connections between each subsequent item in the set.

Positive	Negative
Good	Evil
God	Devil
Virtuous	Sinful
Male	Female
Heavenly	Earthly
Light	Dark
White	Black
Pristine	Filthy
Of the Mind	Of the Body
Thinking	Feeling
Rational	Emotional
Theoretical	Experiential
Quantitative	Qualitative
Objective	Subjective
Fact	Fiction

With recognition that the above tropes are all pieces of a larger system of subjugation, the pairs that I will focus on here are those at the bottom of the chart that relate directly to knowledge production (thinking/feeling, rational/emotional, theoretical/experiential, quantitative/qualitative, objective/

subjective, fact/fiction). In Western culture, ways of knowing that are coded as positive, like rational, logical, objective, are legitimized; and negatively coded ways of knowing, like emotional, intuitive, experiential are disassociated from truth. The latter are not considered “real”, as they are difficult or impossible to support with evidence and facts (both “positive” types of information). Since emotional, bodily ways of knowing cannot be proven the way that quantitative, objective thought can, they are eliminated from the canon of what is true, real, and worthwhile. In the process, we learn not to listen to our bodies, that the mind trumps the heart, and that what we think is always more pertinent than what we feel. If some sentiment or idea is not logical or explainable, it is not valid; it ought to be ignored or explained away.

Other tropes associated with a privileged rationality are whiteness and masculinity, while femininity and blackness are linked to a disadvantaged subjectivity (Beard, 2015; Lutz, 1995). As a result, “positive” types of knowledge are associated with and privilege those whose physical characteristics are similarly coded. On the other hand, those who are coded as negative—women, non-whites, and non-heterosexuals—are not simply understood to think in invalid ways, they themselves become invalid entities and are positioned as such in cultural hierarchies. As Franz Fanon (2008) writes, “We are the chosen people; look at the color of our skin; others are black or yellow because of their sins.” Here Fanon demonstrates how validating or invalidating judgments of moral value are assigned to individuals based on racial (or gender, or sexual, or...) categorizations as they align with the positive and negative ends of The Binary.

### **Significance**

The adoption and normalization of superior and inferior binaries in the collective psyche and in everyday discourse has severely damaging effects on those with inferior assignments. It has become clear that traditional Western classificatory schemes are stiflingly oppressive, and through protest, organization, and engaged scholarship, their flaws are being exposed. Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) explain that “with the increasing circulation of peoples globally, identities are being fragmented, hyphenated and in conflict, and can no longer be put back together in the same old way. The verities on which identity—whether of gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, or religion—

have traditionally been based no longer provide the answers... the explanatory schemes upon which identity was based have been shown not to rest on the bedrock of fact” (pg. 1). They call for a critical examination of the ways in which different types of knowledge and information are classified and subsequently associated with certain human attributes or characteristics that continue to privilege dominant groups and discourses while stifling many voices and delegitimizing certain groups of people in spaces such as courthouses, classrooms, and churches. In addition to severely hindering the ability of these silenced individuals to participate with agency within both personal relationships and their communities, eschewing other truly valuable ways of thinking and knowing harms, fragments, and prevents progress in our society and ourselves.

To move our communities toward wholeness and equality, I believe that we need to access and mobilize negatively coded ways of thinking and knowing. I do not think that policies, institutions, or even revolutions conceptualized through privileged epistemologies alone will lead to improvement or repair. To break through binaries and understand all individuals as valued and valid, we need compassion, empathy, and sensitivity—all irrational and non-objective. It is through careful examination of our epistemologies and their relationship to our identities and our conceptualizations of others that we can begin to shift them to become more inclusive, more humanizing, more fluid. This is work that must be done both in individual minds and hearts, and together as a collective. This paper is the beginning of one such examination.

### **Situating Myself**

As I complete this essay, I am concluding my second year of graduate studies at the University of Minnesota. My work thus far has included explorations into critical theory, critical race theory, postcolonialism, feminist and queer studies, and poststructuralism, among others. These theories and philosophies have helped me to begin to critically examine my own identity and position in global and local systems of inequality and oppression. I was fortunate to have grown up in a suburb of a large liberal and progressive city. As such, my community strove to be inclusive of various types of people and thought, although this was not always the case, and is still not today. My grandmother, a fiercely independent and deeply

thoughtful woman, practiced Transcendental Meditation for decades, as did many others in my family's social circle. As such I was raised in the purview of alternative worldviews and ways of thinking, although I did not actively practice myself. As a Middle Eastern, Jewish, American woman I have found myself at different times to be assigned to the "good" or "bad" ends of binaries, sometimes of the same one. For example, racially I appear white, although I am neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant. While I typically enjoy the privilege that comes with being categorized as "white", there are moments where my Arab name, religion, and olive skin and dark eyes code me as non-white. These moments are few and far between, but elicit a very specific, typically negative response in others and contemporarily cause me deep discomfort. To me, these experiences expose the ruse of binary categories, the fluidity amongst the poles, and the folly of assigning positive and negative values to opposite ends. In reality, I, and most others, do not fall at one end of the binary, but rather inhabit the space in between (Anzaldúa, 1987; Fine, 1994). These insights have fostered a deeper understanding not just of how these binary categories affect the ways we understand ourselves and others, but also of how they function within institutions. I will now explore some of the manifestations of binaries in education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I will use the work of postcolonial and feminist scholars to discuss the ways in which dualities manifest in discourse and practice, and how they consequently damage individuals and communities through suppression of non-dominant ways of knowing and being. I find the conversation between these two schools of thought particularly useful for this application in that each aims to legitimize the voices of a particular disenfranchised group, yet each approaches the work differently. The original aim of feminism was to empower women while legitimizing and centering their voices and experiences. Early feminists argued both that women were not inferior to men in terms of intelligence and intellectualism, and also that female-coded ways of thinking were important indicators of reality and of knowledge. Critics, however, pointed out that this brand of feminism excluded non-white women, in that it represented women as a white, heterosexual, and homogenous group (Narayan, 1997). Over the past three decades, third wave feminist thought has attempted to move past these hindrances. Scholars such as Audre



Lorde and bell hooks have insisted that feminist theory must recognize the heterogeneity of the female experience by taking up issues of race, nation, and sexuality, among others. In her book *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), feminist and postcolonial scholar Trinh Minh-ha invokes Alice Walker, who speaks “of the necessity of learning to discern the true feminist—“for whom racism is inherently an impossibility”—from the white female opportunist—“for whom racism, inasmuch as it assures white privilege, is an accepted way of life” (pg. 83). She thus argues that one cannot be a feminist and a racist, as contemporary feminist theory recognizes that the suppression of any marginalized voice - be it feminine, black, homosexual, disabled—supports the same hierarchy that oppresses women. They argue that one cannot seek to trouble a binary without seeking to trouble The Binary.

Feminist scholars also trouble dominant forms of knowledge more directly. In her essay *The Gender of Theory* (1995), Catherine Lutz explains that feminist scholarship “directly challenges non-feminist scholarship rather than defining itself as simply another specialty working alongside colleagues in a neatly partitioned division of labor over the social body” (p.251) Feminists do not seek acceptance or higher placement within the current hierarchy of knowledge, but attempt to subvert it. These efforts, while not always successful express an acknowledgement of the value of alternative ways of knowing. Accordingly, many feminist scholars push back against objectivism and assume a strongly anti-positivist stance. Positivism stipulates that empirical inquiry is capable of proving the existence of certain natural phenomena and constitutes an authoritative body of knowledge. Positivists also assume that the social and natural worlds can both be accurately described in such a fashion. The feminist rejection of positivism represents an epistemological shift that questions the hegemony of the scientific method as the primary source of knowledge production.

Feminist theorists seek alternative approaches to inquiry not just in terms of the questions asked, but also in terms of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie intellectual investigation. Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) have argued that even basic assumptions about what we assume is “of nature” is not universally so, but rather has been assigned

as such by longstanding cultural forces that support certain hierarchies. The claim that science is somehow distinct from culture naturalizes a hierarchy of knowledge that hinges on the nature/culture binary. In refusing the scientific method as the most apt way to approach academic inquiry, feminist theorists push for the dismantling of a hierarchy of knowledge that is embedded with biases, such as racism and sexism (Harding, 1987). As feminist scholars seek a reinvention and reworking of the body of academic knowledge, an anti-positivist stance allows for the acceptance of a wider range of individuals who are considered knowledge producers, recognition that the social world exists differently for individuals viewing it from different perspectives, and a much broader and complete understanding of what constitutes knowing and being.

Feminism also rejects traditional methods of scientific knowledge-seeking that aim to be value-neutral, dispassionate, and objective (Harding, 1987). This type of inquiry was, and in many disciplines continues to be, the gold standard of empirical research. Yet this approach to research naturalizes the objective researcher, who, again, has typically been white, heterosexual, and male. Feminist theory instead offers an alternative: a legitimization of knowledge-seeking that is passionate, ethically-conscious, and politically motivated. This is among the most important contributions of the theory—a call for scholars to care, ardently, about their work and its implications, and to refuse to apologize for the passion that drives their studies. This assertion in itself represents the acceptance and legitimization of alternative epistemologies and re-centers emotion, passion, compassion, and love. By pointing to the fallacy of “objectivity”, feminists make a strong case for the value of subjectivity and for the ability of a subjective lens to illuminate a reality that is contextual and historically and temporally situated.

Finally, feminist theory insists that research and knowledge production ought to seek to reimagine the world, not simply describe it. In this way, feminism is inherently oriented toward social justice. Feminist scholars critique traditional “scientific” research questions as benefiting those who ask them, typically white, heterosexual males in positions of status or authority. As an alternative, feminists call on scholars to focus on the questions non-dominant groups might want answered—inquiries that focus on how to change current conditions and



emancipate oppressed peoples, rather than on those that seek Truth (Harding, 1987). In a similar vein, Nancy Fraser (2000) calls upon feminist thinkers to push for redistribution of resources alongside a redistribution of recognition; she insists that tangible, material benefits should accompany a reimagining of how we value different voices and viewpoints. Thus research that is actionable, that comes with a motive, and questions that seek to change or transform are legitimated and encouraged by feminist theory.

Postcolonialism similarly attempts to dismantle hierarchies through an examination and denouncement of binaries of colonizer/colonized and self/other. Postcolonial scholars recognize the confusing effects that these binaries have on individuals' hearts and minds. They argue that the colonizers, who are Western and white, impose their own ontologies and subjectivities on the colonized, who are by definition considered "other" in this framework. The colonizers subsequently define their own identities by distancing themselves from those they colonize, yet cannot fully escape their binary opposite. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha writes that the colonizer is "tethered to, *not* confronted by, this dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being. (pg. 44). Bhabha thus argues that the binary poles of self and other are and will always remain tied to each other, that it is impossible to completely divorce either. This reluctant but inevitable connection results in an otherness of the self, disguised as a division of self and other. It is this internal split that causes fractures not just within individual souls, but within entire communities and societies.

Like feminism, postcolonialism seeks a revolutionary re-imagining of the ways knowledges are produced and valued. Bhabha (1994) explains that "a struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial depersonalization not only alienates the Enlightenment idea of 'Man', but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge" (pg. 41). A struggle against physical and economic oppression by colonizers thus necessitates a struggle

against their ways of knowing and against their framings of reality, which serve to enable their dominance. In this sense binaries related to epistemology and binaries that assign privilege based on demographic details are tightly intertwined. Yet, in the neocolonial world, the colonizers have found ways to stifle and contain the arguments against them through the use of dominant epistemes. In *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), Ashis Nandy explains that “it is possible today to be anti-colonial in a way which is specified and promoted by the modern world view as ‘Proper’, ‘sane’ and ‘rational’. Even when in opposition, that dissent remains predictable and controlled” (pg. 12). It thus follows that access to non-dominant, subjugated knowledges is required for real progress; attempts at change built on the sanctioned knowledge of the colonizer will only result in a reification or reproduction of the hierarchy that supports him.

Postcolonial scholars further address the explicit use of binaries to maintain a privileged position by dominant groups in the neocolonial world. For example, Edward Said (1978) explains the concept of the “Orient” as a homogeneous and romanticized cultural concept created by the West to describe the East. Because the West created the term, it retains the power to define it; consequently the representations of the Orient produced in the West are inherently framed by dominant epistemological assumptions that devalue the voiceless, othered Orient. Yet while the contributions of Said are both valuable and significant, they do not manage to fully transcend hierarchical binary thinking. While Said is critical of the relationship inherent in the East/West distinction and insists that it is socially constructed, he still relies on these essentialist categories to explain the world.

Yet some postcolonial scholars, especially those who also embrace feminist thought, critique the colonizer/colonized relationship through a refutation of the existence of those categories and a recognition of the fluidity of human identity—that one may be both colonizer and colonized in the same moment. For example, in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988), Gayatri Spivak argues that when describing the subaltern, those members of society that exist socially and politically outside the realm of colonial power structures, scholars typically describe a homogeneous population of marginalized people, represented and spoken for by men. She insists that the postcolonial project had not gone far enough,

that while it sought to legitimate the voices of the subaltern, its exclusion of female voices and experiences represented an upholding of the Binary as evidenced by a privileging of male over female. Spivak further asserts that the dominant ontologies imposed by the colonizer are an example of “epistemic violence” in that they represent a “project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (pg. 24) by destroying or delegitimizing their endemic knowledges; yet she also asserts that “the narrow epistemic violence of imperialism gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme” (pg. 28). She thus recognizes that the colonizer’s imposed ways of knowing do more than constitute self/other, they strengthen all binary categories and cause harm to multiple elements of an individual’s heart and mind.

Other feminist postcolonial scholars interrogate the damaging effects of binary assignments on identity. Nina Asher (2005) describes this work as presenting “useful analyses of... interstitiality and implicatedness...which emerge in cross-cultural particularly in the present-day, global contexts of school and society” (pg. 1080). The usefulness that Asher mentions is significant—these scholars use the questioning social justice narratives of feminism to mobilize the identity work of postcolonialism. For example, as Michelle Fine (1994) contends, we must ask “what is, and is not, ‘happening between,’ within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence” (pg. 135). Alternatively, Gloria Anzaldua (1997) argues in support of a “mestiza consciousness,” a multidimensional subjectivity that would honor marginalized voices and push back against hierarchical systems of oppression. This mestiza consciousness is achieved through a process of conscientization that necessitates a critical awareness of one’s positionality and subsequent action to support the repairing of the rifts that divide both the self and society. bell hooks (1989) describes these transgressions past socially constructed boundaries of race, gender, and class “defiant political gesture(s),” and insists that the goal of these activities must be to “stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture, towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is

possible” (pg. 145). In doing this work, then, it is also important to interrogate what ways of seeing and theorizing underlie both the text of stories and our understandings of them, as we attempt to access alternative understandings that welcome previously silenced voices.

### **Examination**

#### *An Eastern Transgression*

*What I Learned in Medical School* (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004) features an essay by Akilesh Palanisamy, who grew up in a traditional Indian family. After his first year of medical school, while reflecting on deeper questions about life and reality, he became interested in Ayurveda, the traditional medical system of India. He took an introductory Ayurveda course in Coimbatore, South India, and felt that he had “fallen in love” with the practice, which he committed to incorporating into his practice as a doctor in the U.S. He titled his essay *Seeing with New Eyes*.

*“Ayurvedic reasoning often proceeds from macrocosm to microcosm, relying on an intuitive understanding of the whole to define the parts. Conversely, “Western science usually begins with smaller units and progresses to larger structures, believing that understanding all the parts leads to understanding the whole. This difference reflects the holistic basis of Ayurvedic thinking and, in contrast, the more mechanistic and reductionist Western approach.” (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004 pg.129)*

*“With them (other medical students in the US), I agree that scientific research is essential, but I also try to point out the limitations of science and explain that it is only one tool we can use to understand the world. I often find it difficult to bridge the gap between these different perspectives, however.” (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004 pg. 132)*

*“Eventually, I want to integrate the clinical practices of Ayurveda and allopathic medicine. I believe that each represents a different but equally valid way of understanding health and that both have a great deal to contribute to the future of health care.” (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004, pg. 134)*

Through his travels and access to alternative worldviews, Palanisamy is able to recognize the limits and shortcomings of allopathic (Western) medicine. He focuses on India, a former colony, and acknowledges the lesser place its ways of knowing occupy in the field of medicine. He calls the Indian system “holistic” and the Western system “reductionist,” which reflects the exclusionary nature of the Western canon of knowledge. It is reductionist because it includes and accepts only one way of understanding and one way of validating. This approach often ignores context—it operates under a guise of timelessness that fails to recognize specificity and situation. In addition, the Western knowledge system seeks to reinforce its authority by dismissing Ayurveda as “soft”, “hokey”, or “not real science.”

Palanisamy explains the difficulty in convincing others to look beyond these discourses. He describes his connection with Ayurveda as “falling in love,” an experience clearly related to the subjective, emotional, “negative” end of the Binary, yet also one he feels is essential to legitimate. Perhaps because of his personal connection to and experience with Indian philosophy, he does not see this way of understanding as less valid or valuable, but acknowledges the tension his perspective creates in spaces of Western learning. As Fanon (2008) writes of the colonized: “their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own” (pg. 90). Thus the tension that Palanisamy expresses can be read as a clash between his love for his family’s ways of knowing and the Western ways of knowing that refuse to acknowledge the former as legitimate. bell hooks (1989) explains that even when marginalized individuals like Palanisamy have access to dominant spaces and language, they must travel to the center to collaborate with their colleagues—the colonizers will not meet them in the margins. Palanisamy’s existence in this centered space and his loyalty to Ayurveda are thus actions, forms of resistance against the institutional knowledge prescribed by the colonizers.

Yet the seeming contention between allopathic medicine and Ayurveda does not seem to bother Palanisamy. Instead, he touts the complementary, rather than oppositional, nature of Binary opposites and asserts that together they are stronger than either is alone. Here he echoes Anzaldúa, who writes that, “at the Confluence of two or more genetic streams, with



chromosomes constantly “crossing over,” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, and “alien” consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestizo*” (77). Palanisamy is succeeding in living in the in between spaces and recognizing and valuing within himself the “positive” and “negative” binary poles and the productivity their confluence provides.

### **Women’s (health) Care**

Drawing on my own experience in this section, I consider what I learned from a close friend of mine, Luke, who graduated from medical school, after five years of hard work and grueling hours. Throughout that time, we had many opportunities to discuss health, medicine, and what it means to provide care. Below is a brief conversation that I recall vividly.

*After his second year, Luke and his classmates started rotations, a time when they began to think seriously about which specialization they would chose. Around this time, Luke and I had a conversation that has stayed with me. When we were discussing his experience in gynecology and obstetrics, I expressed my strong preference for female physicians, especially in women’s health specialties. I was curious why some of his male friends were pursuing gynecology. Now that 47% of medical students are female (AAMC 2014), shouldn’t there be enough women to fill the positions that treat women exclusively? His response shocked me. “A majority of women, studies show, prefer male obstetricians and gynecologists to female practitioners.” What? How could this be? Of course there are plenty of talented and competent male OB/GYNs, but none of them have lived in female body, and consequently none have experienced, for example, the physicality of the female reproductive system. I spent a long time mulling over this statistic (which, admittedly, I have not been able to confirm), feeling confused and almost betrayed by it. Aren’t we, as women, able enough to care for our own bodies without requiring consult from men? Why do male doctors, because of their gender, have so much more perceived authority female doctors (and what of those individuals who do not identify neatly as either)?*



I think this interaction attests to the naturalization of hierarchies through discourse. Cultural discourses can become so ingrained in our psyches that they become impossible to move beyond without critical thought and radical re-envisioning. My above conversation is an example of how binaries related to gender and to knowledge are one and the same. Men are so strongly associated with rationality, truth, and intelligence, that their gender alone can serve to position their speech and actions favorably (Beard 2015). This is representative of how obdurate the male/female manifestation of the Binary can be. Trinh Minh-Ha (1989) describes the duality concisely: “man thinks, woman feels.” Her pithy sentence shows how rational thought is an inherent element of maleness, while femininity can’t exist without feeling and emotion. The women who prefer the care of male OB/GYNs have internalized these categories. Whether stated directly or not, these discourses shape women to be less intelligent, less capable, and less authoritative than their male counterparts.

These assumptions about women follow them into professional spaces, and are particularly powerful in official sites of knowledge production. For example, of the place of women in academia, Lutz (1995) writes, “to the extent that women are seen as less intelligent, their writing will be seen as less theoretical, no matter how they write” (pg. 259). Minh-Ha (1989) argues similarly that writing is a male-aligned activity, as good writing is clear, impersonal, and rational. Women often receive different feedback than men- they are supposed to write about themselves and their bodies, perhaps in the style of diary entries, because that is how “women writers” are expected to write. Thus the quality of women’s work or of their scholarship doesn’t matter because in light of hegemonic discourses the simple fact that they are female makes them lesser. Consequently, female patients prefer male physicians because the qualities that supposedly make a good physician, objectivity, intelligence, authority, are embodied not in “doctor” but in “man.”

So gender roles are naturalized in the social context of classificatory schemes. Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) write, “the social [is] embedded in the natural, but in a particular version of it” (pg. 5). So social conceptualizations of gender come to be considered part of nature, but the contexts under

which that specific nature was created, and by whom, for whom so often goes unexamined. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Franz Fanon succeeds in troubling male/female duality by invoking natural imagery: “Beware of rhythm, the Mother Earth bond, and that mystic, carnal marriage between man and the cosmos” (pg. 104). And, “Long live the bond between Man and the Earth!” (pg. 106). By articulating the connection between Man (positive) and the Earth, which he describes as the female Mother, he intentionally confuses binary poles in a call for their dismantling. He describes a “carnal” (of the body, feminine, negative) relationship between man (positive) and the cosmos (positive) to trouble belief in the existence of oppositional opposites. By scrambling the Binary, Fanon at once problematizes and mocks it.

### **Objectifying Learning, Intellectualizing Illness**

Kevin Takakuwa’s essay in *What I Learned in Medical School* (2004) describes how he left a career in business to attend medical school to learn how to “medically care” for members of his community. Once at school, he was quickly disillusioned by the lack of care, of any variety, in the medical school environment. In his essay, seven years into prerequisites and medical school courses, he recounts how he grappled with this contradiction.

*“Grant, a new classmate who was bicycling off campus with me during our first month of school, spoke with shameless optimism about the powers of medicine and described medical school as a “privilege” that granted us the ability to indulge in academic pursuits without being bothered by the same day-to-day worries as others—like getting a job or earning a real living. Images flashed at me: consoling a close college friend who had just seroconverted to HIV-positive; then, several years later, standing over his ravaged, lifeless body. I turned my attention back to Grant. He continued on about how our minds would be spared these annoyances so that we could focus on the important “intellectual” challenge ahead. I wondered what happy drug he was taking.” (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004, pg. 93)*

*“Everyone but me seemed to know the rules of appropriate topics. When I tried to talk about the lack*

*of available tutors, the school's dismissal policies, the possibility of converting from an inherently competitive grading system to a pass/no pass system, or improving the curriculum and teaching, I was ignored, discounted, or attacked." (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004, pg. 96)*

*"My convictions and morals began to haunt me. I refused to study old exams, a practice I believed was unethical and counterproductive to real understanding. I wanted to learn conceptually, to know the purpose behind the information. But there was no time for this, and there was no efficient way for me to grasp the material. I tried to adapt, altering my strategies iteration after iteration, but to no avail. Every quarter, I struggled to pass. Sometimes I hovered around the class mean, but other times I fell to the lower end of the grading curve. As the quarters ground on, I couldn't avoid hearing the gossip that separated people into categories: smart or dumb." (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004, pg. 97)*

Takakuwa experiences this Western system of education and knowledge production as painful and confusing. The death of his friend left him with a conceptualization of health and health care as personal, visceral, bodily, and emotional. His fellow student's assertion that medicine was an "intellectual" challenge, which accurately reflected the medical school curriculum, seemed absurd to him. How could he attempt to cure and care from a perspective that was academic and impersonal? And how could he learn to be a good physician when he was not afforded the time to think deeply and to reflect? The role of physicality and emotion in the medical school curriculum is unique given that the content focuses on bodies and ways to cure them. As Takakuwa notices, there is an inherent contradiction in medical classrooms when Western knowledges insist on viewing the body objectively, but the experiences of the patient and the physician are unavoidably subjective, physical, and often, emotional. Darder argues that Western epistemologies ignore the body's ways of knowing and thinking to the severe detriment of students. She writes, "the production of knowledge (in the classroom) is neither engaged nor presented as a historical and collective process, occurring in the flesh and its sensual capacities for experiencing and responding to the world" (pg. 218). She thus explains a disconnection in

the way that knowledge is produced and taught. She argues that knowing is inherently physical, that it cannot be separated from the body, and that strictly objective perspectives obscure many forms of truth. Darder quotes Christopher Beckey: 'The flesh, the material aspect of the body, is seen as a hindrance which must be overcome, negated, and transcended' as if it were not involved in the act of knowing at all" (pg. 218). Takakuwa, aware of essential role of emotion and physicality in learning, is unable to excel in a curriculum that he sees as ineffective, rote, and pointless. There is no place for other types of knowledges, and when he problematizes this, he is "ignored, discounted, or attacked." This response is similar to the cultural invalidation of emotional and subjective knowledges.

As Takakuwa comes to understand medicine as competitive, unfriendly, and impersonal, he loses the impetus to identify as a physician. As Bhabha writes, "the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (pg. 45). Here Takakuwa struggles against that identity and refuses to assume that image. While this results in his inability to succeed within his school, he succeeds in coming to understand the purpose behind the information, in thinking critically, and in reflecting. bell hooks might describe Takakuwa as trying to maintain an oppositional worldview from the margins, a place from which he can look "both from the outside in and from the inside out" (pg. 149). hooks explains that these experiences can be immensely painful, but that in these spaces exist the tools for change, and that by even continuing to exist also in the center, Takakuwa was performing an act of resistance.

### **Oma's Favourites**

In this section, I share a memory from my childhood about my grandmother. When I was a little girl, my parents, my siblings, and I would go frequently to visit my grandmother, Oma, who lived about twenty minutes from us. Below is a memory that has stayed with me.

*Oma's house was a place to play—a garden filled with earthworms and ladybugs, myriad closets and corners for hide and seek, and drawers with "secret" stashes of candy. Part of our*

*play also involved our grandmother. “Oma, what is your favorite color” I would ask while coloring. “Oma, what is your favorite food” at dinner. Oma’s answer to these questions was always the same. “I don’t have favorites.” “Why not?” I would reply. “Because if I pick a favorite, then the rest have to be worse.” As a child these refusals to engage frustrated me. As an adult, I see that maybe Oma was on to something...*

My grandmother in her own way, was refusing to recognize the superiority of one Binary pole. She was asserting the problematic of “better.” She was also, on the smallest scale, disrupting dominant discourses. She was working, in the moments she could, to explain something to her grandchildren, to direct their educations. She was teaching that it is okay to eschew “the demand of identification—that is to be *for* an Other— (which) entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness” (Bhabha 1994 pg.45). Oma was by no means a simple person, and many days she couldn’t even stand to be a pleasant one. But Oma thought deeply, and she committed herself to a life of learning both intellectually and spiritually. Sometimes she shared her wisdom with me, I like to think in moments of love. Oma is proof that this work of creating wholeness through compassion and love can be done not just on a large scale, but also in the minutiae of our everyday lives.

### **Treating Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**

Heather Goff is a first-year medical student who has struggled with depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) for several years. In her essay in *What I Learned in Medical School* (2004), she discusses the stigma surrounding issues of mental health and how her experiences inform her identity as a student and her future practice as a physician.

*“Why would anyone stop taking their medication, given the severity of OCD symptoms? I’ve asked the same question of other patients. Treatment compliance is always an issue in any type of patient care. In psychiatric care, the problem is compounded by cultural beliefs and the stigma surrounding mental illness. Although intellectually I understand that antidepressants treat brain chemistry in the same way that insulin treats blood glucose chemistry, on an emotional level I have*

*great difficulty coming to terms with taking psychiatric medications. It's one thing to take antibiotics because you get an infection. The infection isn't your fault; it can happen to anyone. But taking medication because you feel "sad" all the time makes you suspect that something is wrong with you, not just your chemicals."* (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004, pg. 51)

*"Scientists are supposed to look at information with a clear eye and an open mind. As physicians-in-training, we are supposed to listen to patients' problems in that same objective manner. But how do I do that? How can I sit and listen to a depressed patient without remembering some of my own pain? How can I watch a patient with OCD go through a compulsion and not be drawn to my own compulsive behavior?"* (Takakuwa et al, eds. 2004, pg. 52)

Goff struggles to find her identity despite the seeming contradictions that envelop her. At once she is doctor and patient, tasked with and in need of curing. In her writing she navigates these "split-affinities." (Fine, 1994). She also struggles to discern the boundaries of the physical and nontangible aspects of her condition. An infection, for example, though invisible is tangible; it can be separated from the self. A psychiatric disorder, on the other hand, is harder to conceptualize as material and becomes associated with identity. Because of her illness, there is a problem with her mind (the site of objective reasoning) that results in an excessive amount of emotion, which is coded negatively. The juxtaposition of the way she feels and the way she is seen attests to the fact that "these dynamic borders are not only without, they are also within" (Asher, 2002 pg. 86). Goff expresses that the alternative way of knowing that she has attained through her experience with illness may hinder her ability to work as a physician. She is expected to look with a "clear eye" and listen in an "objective manner," but she does not feel that these ways of thinking support or reflect her as an individual. She believes in the worth of emotional, feeling, feminine ways of knowing and thinking, but understands that she is not supposed to draw on her personal experiences in the profession of medicine. Goff is acutely aware of the damage caused by this rift between objective and subjective, between personal and professional.



Catherine Lutz (1995) explains how “the masculine bias of the canon exemplifies a wider process by which hegemonic discourses—especially on gender and race—are established, how “uncomfortable information” is erased from public view” (pg. 250). In Goff’s case, the realities of her disorder are “uncomfortable”. They are awkward to bring up, even in a medical setting, and they are thus ignored as if they did not exist. Of course they do exist, which causes Goff to feel silenced, knowing that if she chooses to discuss them she may well be dismissed as “emotional” or “irrational.” These hegemonic labels also entail a dehumanizing process. Since “men” (or people) are defined by their virtue, their rationality, and consequently their whiteness and maleness, labels that pertain to the “negative” binary pole strip those assigned to them of their humanity. A black man is inherently not a man, because a man is not defined by the negative binary pole. Geoff, who is identified as “sick” and “emotional”, also experiences dehumanization through debasement of her ways of thinking and knowing.

Yet feminist intellectual traditions would insist on the validity of Geoff’s yearnings. Feminists would maintain that Geoff *should* incorporate her own experiences and feelings into her practice because they constitute knowledge that is just as valuable as that which she can access through her textbooks. Drawing upon her subjectivities might also allow Geoff to provide care that is more compassionate, personal, and kind. In doing so, Geoff might be able to further conceptualize a notion of care that is more broadly conceived and that might lead to better treatment of her patients.

## **Conclusion**

Western epistemologies codify hierarchies by ranking individuals based on their assignments to positive or negative binary categories, and reinforcing, through cultural discourses, specific versions of truth and reality that support the existence of said hierarchies. In addition to promulgating structural inequality, these categorizations represent false truisms that often manage to avoid examination and analysis, and are reproduced in schools and universities under the guise of “traditional” or “classical” learning and rhetoric. Positive and negative binary assignments, especially as they relate to ways of thinking and knowing, are problematic for several reasons. First, the existence of binaries as they are known and conceptualized is a

deception. Ideological categories such as *subjective* and *objective* are nearly impossible to enact in practice. Even in the “hard” sciences, objectivity can be an illusion. For example, the viewing of the movement of quantum particles is not a truly objective endeavor. Scientists know that their measuring devices cause particles to act in different ways than they do when they are not under observation. Thus knowledge of their nature is inherently influenced by the subjective gaze of the researcher. Similarly, when we seek to understand the nature of a phenomenon like love, it is the passion and subjectivity of poetry and literature that come closest to providing an objective description. So even those things imagined to be most objective or most subjective in fact exist in Anzaldua’s *mestiza*, in Fine’s *hyphens*, and in Asher’s *interstices* (Anzaldua, 1987; Asher, 2005; Fine, 1994).

Second, these binary extremes of fact and fiction do not exist, yet they are understood as real because they are defined as material. While thinking and feeling are both immaterial processes, we understand them as concrete because they are defined as located within certain parts of the body. Thinking is done in the head, more specifically in the brain. We can measure it quantitatively. We can see its movement on a screen. Thought then becomes a thing that can claim as its opposite another thing, feeling. Feeling is located in the heart, or in the gut. We can explain it through hormones and chemicals, we can see it in expressions and hear it in voices. By materializing the abstract, we constrict its movement. By asserting that thinking and feeling are real and defined, we negate the possibility of an in-between space. By claiming that thinking is superior to feeling, we debase feeling and all of the knowledges associated with it. We create a hierarchy where everything closer to thinking is better, everything closer to feeling is worse, and all of the other binary categories associated with the two, along with the individuals they ensnare, are also assigned progressive values in the hierarchy.

Third, the valuing of one end of the imagined binary over the other, the assertion that objectivity, rationality, and theory are valid ways of knowing while subjectivity, emotionality, and experience are not, preclude us from accessing the tools necessary for recognition and acceptance of other ways of thinking and being. Privileged knowledges allow us to analyze, to compare, and to describe, but delegitimized knowledges allow

us to care, to empathize, to feel. These are the radical ways of knowing ourselves and understanding each other that have the power to break down walls of ideology and to build new connections that honor all ways of knowing as equally valid and equally valuable. Postcolonial feminist scholars assert the value of emotional, affective, and psychic tools in this endeavor (Asher, 2005). But potent discourses that constantly abase and dismiss feeling and emotion protect the reign of rational objectivity as supreme, as better than. Thus the protection of the privileged and the negation of the suppressed go hand in hand. Without the right tools walls cannot be made to crumble, and without access to or awareness of those tools, we might not even recognize that the walls exists.

Lastly, it is important that we recognize the harm that we endure and inflict by ignoring the knowledge that our emotions, our bodies, and our intuitions produce. This harm can be seen in classrooms where students are not taught to think deeply or understand profoundly, in hospital rooms where patients are treated with logic rather than care, and in potentially dangerous situations when rational thinking cannot lead us to make the right choices. The assertion that there is one correct, superior way to know that is universally more useful irrespective of context, creates fractures in our society and divides and categorizes us. Rather than see these differences as complimentary and in harmony, we see them as oppositional and in conflict. This idea is performative in that the action of putting one ideal in opposition to another creates the conflict, and not the other way around. How then, do we heal these rifts and breaks? How can we make ourselves and our communities more whole and more healthy? Perhaps Gloria Anzaldua (1987) says it best: "The future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness" (pg. 80). So healing will require an examination not just of what we know, but of how and why we know and think. We need to ask ourselves how our epistemologies, as engrained as they are in our culture and our minds, inherently promote some and silence others, while stymieing our collective human quest for understanding and truth. I also believe that we ought to strive for ways of thinking and being that cease to value binary poles, but instead consider

them equal, complementary ends of a vibrant spectrum of difference. If we can move in this direction on both personal and collective levels, we might contribute to making our society and ourselves more whole, more equal, more compassionate, and more human.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers, as well as to the journal editors, whose thoughtful, insightful comments helped me to reexamine and reshape the ideas put forth in this paper. Thanks as well to Nina Asher for her leadership of our “Postcolonialism, Globalization, and Education” seminar. Her kindness and inquisitiveness pushed us all to think through, beyond, and around the binary.

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